

FOREWORD

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John Smith (interviewee), recorded interview by
Bill Jones (interviewer), date, page, John F. Kennedy
Library Oral History Program

Oral History Interview

with

G. FREDERICK REINHARDT

November, 1966
Rome, Italy

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Ambassador, I wish you'd say something, perhaps, about your earliest impressions of John Kennedy.

REINHARDT: I knew John Kennedy slightly for a number of years before he was elected President, those years he was in Washington as a representative and later as a senator. I really only had a greeting acquaintance with him. And I must confess, that I was surprised to find, after his election to the presidency, that he was a much deeper and more earnest person than he had appeared to be previously. My early impressions of him were of a highly intelligent, agreeable person. But I was most happily surprised to find that he was much more of a person, of much greater complexity and character than I had realized in my earlier association with him.

O'CONNOR: He has been criticized by a number of people as being kind of a playboy when he was young, and not a man of wisdom, though very intelligent, and that's why I was interested in hearing your remarks about that, to see whether or not you felt that was so or not.

REINHARDT: Well, I would confirm the impression. It was certainly my impression. On the other hand, I would hasten to add that I think the evidence during the

REINHARDT: Of course, it was very hard to keep one's sense of proportion in these things, because it may well have been that even if the United States had taken a more aggressive stance it wouldn't have changed the outcome very much, because there are always limits to what an outside influence an outside view or effort can have in the development of any specific political scene.

O'CONNOR: Okay, another problem that involved Italy during the Kennedy Administration was the question of Jupiter missiles in Italy. Were you involved in this at all, in the removal of these missiles?

REINHARDT: Well, I was involved in the removal, but not in their placement. They had been set up here . . .

O'CONNOR: Oh, yes I know. They had been set up before.

REINHARDT: . . . previously.

O'CONNOR: Yes. Well, it has been said that President Kennedy had wished those missiles to be removed earlier in the Administration than they actually were, 1961, early '62, before the Cuban missile crisis.

REINHARDT: I'm not aware of that, I don't know anything about that.

O'CONNOR: Well, I had wondered whether you were aware of it or not. Well, did that present any major problems for you in dealing with the . . .

REINHARDT: Well, it did. It presented a problem which I think we survived alright, but from the Italian point of view--when I say that I'm really thinking though of those sectors of the Italian society that were involved in this business, primarily, of course, the armed forces, and secondarily, the government. They did not like the withdrawal of the missiles, --granted the fact that they were experimental weapons and did not represent really a developed arm. They had never gone beyond the experimental stage really, and it caused a great deal of

difficulty in their maintenance. So there were a lot of reasons for taking them out at from purely strategic ones, if you will. Nevertheless, they did constitute, I mean for Italy, an involvement in a very modern form of weaponry. The Italians set up a whole special brigade of airmen who were trained to handle these missiles and installations, at certain expense, no doubt, and effort. And to have this thing suddenly removed was, from their point of view, a step backwards. Now, I'm sure that many of the thoughtful people understood the reasons for this, and, if you will, the logic of it. But it had a negative effect, at the time, without any question. And to say that the assignment of these missiles was going to be taken up by two or three submarines that nobody ever saw, which were going to be quietly moving around below the surface of the Mediterranean, was hardly a satisfactory recompense, particularly since the Italians themselves did not participate in this other activity.

O'CONNOR: Was it ever suggested to you by any Italian leaders that this was a political deal between the United States and the Soviet Union, that this was a quid pro quo for the Cuban missile crisis victory?

REINHARDT: It was never suggested to me by any of the political leaders, but it was an idea that was very current at the time. Not only here, but in other countries as well.

O'CONNOR: Surely. I wondered if this, whether or not you could tell that this undermined the confidence of political leaders in John Kennedy, or in American will to resist?

REINHARDT: I don't think it did. I think that the success of the Cuban confrontation was so much more important that this did not have that effect. And I'm not at all sure that the removal of the missiles had an effect on Italy as a whole. It affected the people who were involved. Of course, there was another thing about those missiles. In a sense, there were people who understood that they were, at best, a difficult form of defense. They sat glistening on the Plain of Apulia for everybody to see, and it was quite apparent that their destruction by a sudden hostile air strike might not have been too difficult a thing to achieve. The defense of Italy, of course, are up to

the North, along the Alps, and along the Yugoslav frontier, and there wasn't very much down there to defend these missiles.

O'CONNOR: Okay, this really leads into the question of the feeling on the part of the Italian leaders, your understanding of their feeling, toward John Kennedy. Some of them met John Kennedy. I wondered what their impressions were, whether they were confident in his ability as the leader of the West.

REINHARDT: Certainly, my impression is that they were. He was greatly admired. I saw no evidence to the contrary. And I think that this leads me to say, what, perhaps, is the most important thing I can say on this subject. And that is that, Kennedy, for reasons which probably never will be fully analyzed or understood, had the capability of, to use the fashionable term, communicating better than--with Europe--better than most of our leaders seemed to have, or have had. It was extraordinary how his statements had so much more impact on the European audience than those of other Americans. There must have been something in the way he expressed himself, something in his manner, too, that made them feel that he was much nearer to them than the average American. I've asked a number of Italians, people of official and responsible position, if they had any explanation they could give me of his extraordinary popularity here in Italy and elsewhere abroad. The answer is always the same. They aren't able to define it, but they do say, "Well, we understood what he was trying to say better than we have any others." And they all refer to this element I've mentioned, of his unusual capability for communicating his thoughts, and also thoughts that were sympathetic and well received by the audience.

O'CONNOR: An interesting comment that you made about his popularity in Italy brings me to another subject, we can cover it very briefly, and that might be it.

REINHARDT: Can I say one word about his popularity?

O'CONNOR: Sure.

REINHARDT: There's a story, which, I don't know if it ever got